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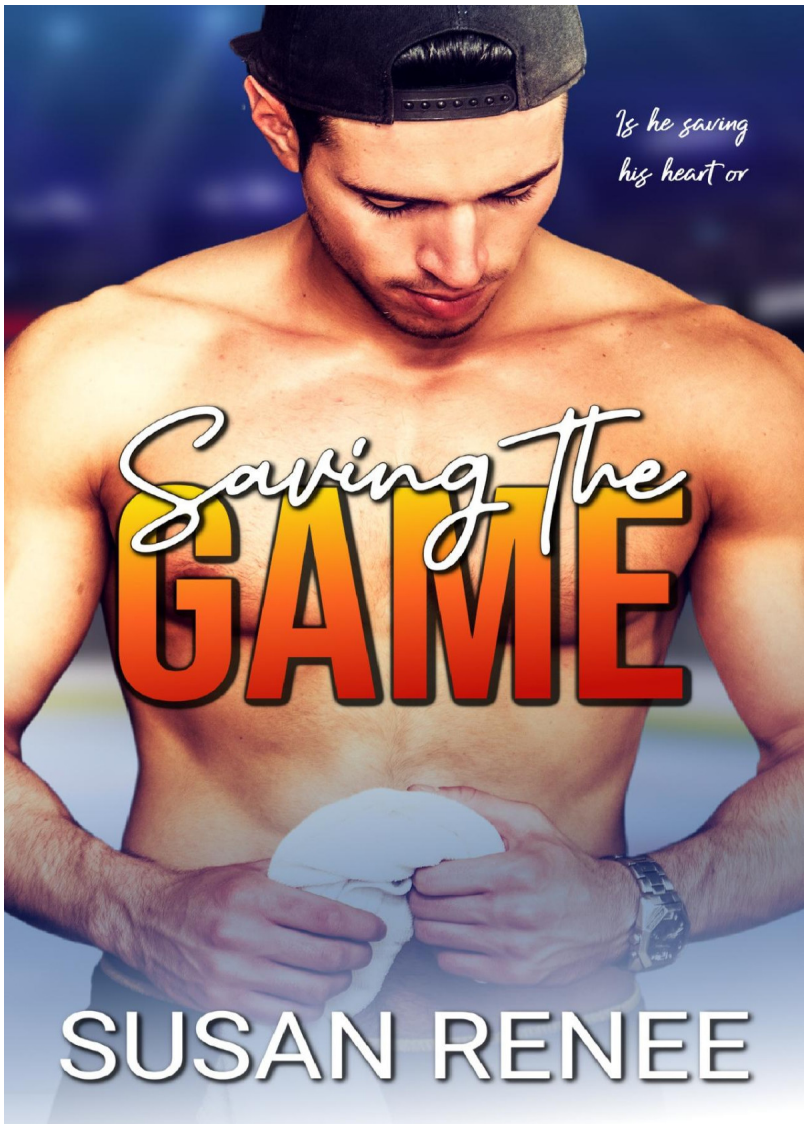

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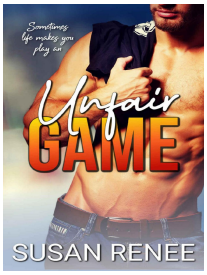

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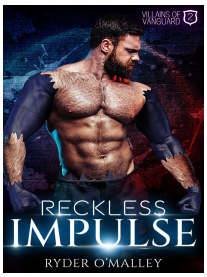

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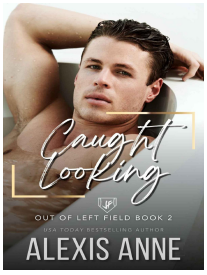

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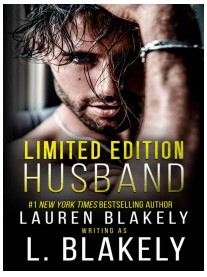

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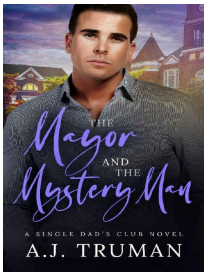

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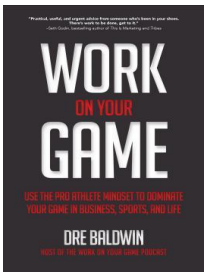

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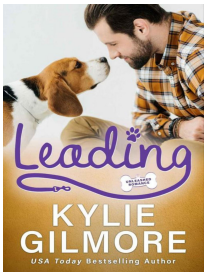

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Is he saving his heart or
Saving the GAME
SUSAN RENEE

SUSAN RENEE

Saving the Game
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Chapter 1

Quinton

"Dude, my love for you is like diarrhea," Hawken professes to Dex as he shoves a few more fries into his mouth to keep from laughing. "I just can't hold it in."

Clearing my throat, I pull Hawken's plate of fries away from him, grinning when he scowls at me as I slide the plate toward Dex. "Dexter I'm pretty sure your bromance boyfriend just said his love for you is shit."

Laughing, Dex grabs a few fries from Hawken's shared plate and tosses them in his mouth. "Trust me, I think I'm beginning to believe him. Chose my sister over me and everything."

"She's a lot prettier than you, and what can I say?" Hawken shrugs. "She sucks my dick better than you do, man."

Dex frowns and throws one of his fries on the table. "Fuck. And I watched tutorials for hours and everything."

Zeke nudges Hawken's arm, chuckling. "He means porn, bro. He watched porn for hours."

"Listen Dex, I've got this all figured out," I tell him with confidence. Lifting the hem of my shirt, I hold it out for him. "Feel my shirt. Do you feel that?"

Dex reaches out and rubs the fabric between his fingers. "Yeah."

"That's boyfriend material right there, man." I wink at him. "Fuck Hawken. There's a new bromance in town." Instead of the French fries Hawken's been gnawing on, I pass Dex my plate of pretzel bites and beer cheese.

The guys laugh as Dex rubs his chin pretending to consider my proposal.

"I do enjoy a good cheese," he says. "And if the next round is on you, I might just have to take you up on the offer, Quinton. Be a good boy and I might even let you grab my ass occasionally."

I sigh like a lovesick teenager. "Be still my heart. Of course, the next round is on me." I stand from our booth. "Be right back."

I head to the bar and order Dex and I another round, saying hello to a few of the mingling fans from out of town who aren't used to seeing the team hang out in a public bar. Pringle's has been good to us for years so most of the regulars know this tends to be our hangout spot. Occasionally though, we get a few newcomers who are shocked to see us here. We're just grateful we have a safe place to hang out and be ourselves once in a while and the management does a fantastic job of helping foster that kind of environment for us.

Cathy, the bartender, hands me my drinks and I thank her, turning to walk back to our booth when someone catches my attention.

"Yes. Quinton, Mom. His name is Quinton Shay."

My head turns toward the female voice when I hear my name. A woman seated at the bar is talking on her cell phone. She's facing away from me so I can't see her face, but hearing my name always makes me take notice. My parents weren't going for normal when they picked my name. They couldn't just settle on Sean, Mike, or Jeff. Nope. They had to decide on a unique name that always had me standing near the back of the line in elementary school. Quinton is not a name you hear often these days.

"What do you mean what does he do? He's a famous hockey player. I told you that."

That's right babe. Just another famous hockey player.

"Oh yeah. He's a super great guy. Total dreamboat. The whole package," she says. My brows peak in response as I stand behind her eavesdropping.

Well, well, well. Dreamboat huh? Maybe I'm gettin' lucky tonight.

"I mean, his schedule is really busy, you know? With games and his charity work and all, so I don't get to see him every day but we've been together for about six months now."

My expression changes from amusement to shock and then right back to amusement.

Who the heck is this girl?

"Dinner?" she squeaks. "Umm, yeah. He might be able to do that."

I tilt my head, watching her from behind with morbid curiosity. She brings a palm to her forehead and sighs. "I'll ask him but with short notice and all, you know…he might not be able to make it."

Wow.

This girl's got balls.

There's got to be a story here and I kind of want to know it.

For shits and giggles of course.

Noticing she's drinking the same thing I'm holding in my hand I linger a bit to listen to the end of her conversation, ignoring Dex's request for another beer.

"Alright. I'll see him in the morning but uh, I'll text him tonight and see if he can make it…yeah. Okay. Bye, Mom."

She lays her phone down on the bar, takes a deep breath, and then drains the rest of the drink in front of her. I know I could walk away from this. By all means I *should* walk away from this. Maybe it's just my lightened mood because of our upcoming

All-star break or maybe I'm straight up stunned by this woman's audacity because last time I checked, I'm not only very single, but I also haven't been on an actual date in years. Whatever this is, I'm intrigued.

If the guys were to hear what just happened, they'd be egging me on to hit on the girl and have myself a fun night. Confidence is attractive in a woman and she surely has that, but something seems off the more I watch her. She's not joking with a friend. She's not texting someone else. Not talking to anyone else, so what gives?

Why the lie?

She finally turns and when I see her face I know I've seen her somewhere before. She's dressed in a pair of tight black pants. Maybe they're leggings, I can't tell, and an oversized sweatshirt that hangs off her shoulder. Her black bra strap is on display. Her chestnut brown hair is tied up in a messy bun, but it's the bandana bow that's making me scroll through my mental rolodex because I know I've seen this woman before.

I don't know what makes me to do it. Maybe sheer dumb curiosity but here I am sliding one of my beers in front of her.

No turning back now.

"So, we're meeting the parents, I hear?"

Her jaw hangs open when I lower myself into the seat next to her and she realizes who I am.

"Oh, my God!" She gives herself a face palm, a goofy smile on her face as she shakes her head. "I totally deserve this, don't I? This is what happens to people like me."

I take a sip of my beer and smile back at her. "People like you? Do you mean women who phone a friend or in your case, a parent, and lie to them about dating hockey players?"

"Shit. You heard all that?"

I laugh this time. "Kind of hard to miss when I was standing just a couple feet away."

"Oh fuuuudge." She brings her hands up to her blushing cheeks. "I am SOOO so sorry. God, you probably think I'm the biggest psycho." Her eyes grow into huge saucers. "I swear I'm not a stalker or anything."

"It's fine. Really," I tell her, mesmerized by her mossy green eyes. "Forgive me, but I feel like I know you from somewhere and I can't for the life of me figure out where. What's your name?"

She takes a sip of the beer I gave her. Part of me wants to chastise her for accepting an open drink from a guy. I might be a famous hockey player but we're not all fine, upstanding men. "Oh. I'm Kinsley Kendrick. I took pictures at Hawken and Rory's wedding in the arena. Maybe you saw me there?"

"Yes!" I sit up taller, pointing my finger at her. "That's it. I remember now." She wore that pretty blue dress. "Sorry I didn't recognize you in casual clothing."

She slouches, slightly rolling her eyes. "Ugh, yeah, sorry. I don't usually dress up anymore unless I absolutely have to."

"Anymore?"

"My parents," she starts with an annoyed nod. "That's who I was talking to on the phone."

"Uh oh." I grin. "This doesn't sound good."

"If I tell you I grew up in L.A. where several celebrity families were our neighbors, does that give you any indication?"

"Ah, so you're a socialite." She narrows her eyes. "Ooor your parents are…or were?"

"In all honesty, I think my parents would scoff at the word socialite. They prefer words with a little more finesse."

I pass her a smirk. "So spoiled little rich girl doesn't describe you?"

She snorts and I smile because for whatever reason I think her little snort is cute. "Not hardly. I mean, if my parents had anything to say about it, I would be back in L.A. helping them run their empire and taking over when they retire, but their life is so far from what I want. That's why I moved here. Far away from them."

"Oh?"

"I've seen enough of that lifestyle to never want to be a part of it ever again."

"Why do you say that?"

She huffs out a light laugh. "Because the perfectly poised rich life just isn't for me. I'm more of a hot mess and happy kind of girl."

Interesting.

It's not every day you see someone who comes from money and does not want the life money can afford. Something about her demeanor draws me in though. Like she has layers I want to peel back one at a time as I get to know her.

"So, you were talking to your parents. Does that mean you're flying home to see them or something?"

"No." She shakes her head with a cringe. "They're in town for a few days on business and they want to meet my rich boyfriend. Because far be it for me to date a normal guy who has a normal job and makes an honest, normal wage." Realizing what she just said, she squeezes her eyes closed and cringes again. "Oh shit. I just put my foot in my mouth. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that you don't—"

"I totally get it," I reassure her. "Professional hockey isn't exactly on the list of normal jobs with a normal wage."

"Right, but it sure as hell made my mom happy to hear I'm not an embarrassment to the family and found a celebrity athlete to date instead of a local plumber, though I'm not positive she believes me. Not that I care at all. I'll tell her anything to keep

her off my back so I can live my life in peace."

"So can I ask you something then?"

"Sure. I mean, I've pretty much laid my entire life story out for you when you never really asked, haven't I?" She smiles. "Ask away."

"Why me?"

"What?"

"Why did you tell your parents you were dating me specifically."

"Uh…" She bites her lip to hide her nervous smile. "Because you're single aaand not at all hard to look at." She winces. "Aaaand you were the first person to come to my mind probably because I saw your post-game interview on T.V."

She's cute when she blushes.

"Well, that's as good a reason as any, and thanks for the compliment."

"No, I should be thanking you," she says as she smooths a hand down my arm. Her simple touch causes me to suddenly think about what it would feel like to have her hands all over me. Or really anyone's hands for that matter. Except for Dex. Not his hands. "For not getting someone to kick me out of this bar the minute you heard me tell my parents I'm dating you. According to my parents I'm a hot mess of one bad decision after another which is evident in the fact I just pulled a lie out of my ass to save myself from their wrath. I really am sorry and don't worry about a thing. I'll be telling them tomorrow that you caught a bug and can't make dinner."

I can't believe I'm doing this. "Or you could tell them I'm available."

She cocks her head. "I'm sorry?"

What the fuck am I doing?

"You said your mom probably doesn't believe you, so why not shove her disbelief in her face? It just so happens, I'm free."

"Wait," she says, leaning back on her stool. "Are you seriously offering to be super petty with me to stick it to my parents to get them off my back?"

I laugh. "What if I told you my name was Quinton Petty Shay?"

Her eyes narrow. "Is it?"

"Not at all." I shake my head. "But this sounds like an opportunity too fun to pass up. If you're going to lie to them about us being in a relationship, go big or go home, right?"

"You're serious?"

"One hundred percent. I have the day off tomorrow. If you're in, I'm in. I could use a reason to have a little fun."

She considers it for a moment, an adorable smirk lighting up her face. I notice the cute dimple in her right cheek when she smiles. She really is quite pretty.

"Can we make up some crazy shit about how we met?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I tell her with a gentle laugh.

"Oh, my God, I can't believe I'm about to take you up on this kind of offer."

"Going once…going twice…"

"I'm in!" She laughs, taking another drink of her beer. "I'm so fucking in."

"Perfect. Let me give you my number and then you can text me the details."

"Okay. It'll probably be super upscale if that's okay. My parents would never step foot in a place like this."

Typing my number into her contact list, I smile. "Don't worry. I'll wear a designer suit." I stand and she follows, offering me her hand.

"It was really nice meeting you, Quinton Petty Shay."

I wrap her hand in mine, her skin soft and warm. I find myself not wanting to let go, but if I don't walk away, I may do something we'll both really regret tomorrow. "The pleasure was all mine, Kinsley."

She sees herself out and I head back to where the guys are seated, laughing about who knows what and who cares.

"Dude, where's my beer?" Dex asks when I lower my near empty glass to the table.

"Our bromance is over before it started Dexter. I'm giving all my fake love to someone else."

"Fake love? What are you talking about?"

"Does this have anything to do with Kinsley?" Hawken asks. "I saw you talking to her."

"Yeah." I nod, sliding into the booth. "It does. She told her parents she was dating me."

The shocked expressions looking back at me make me laugh. "She was lying, obviously. She just wanted her parents off her back so I offered to fuck with them with her because why the hell not?"

Zeke chuckles. "So, you're going to pretend to be her boyfriend?"

"Yup."

"Oh, fuck. This ought to be good."

Chapter 2

Kinsley

"Shut up, you did not." Meredith places her hot coffee mug in front of her and waits for me to swallow my bite. This cinnamon roll might be one of the best things to ever enter my mouth and I am here for it. It's God's gift to carb loaders like me. As one of my best friends since middle school, Meredith and I have treasured our weekly Sunday morning face-time calls. We may not live in the same state anymore but we're committed to staying in touch. When I knew she would be calling this morning, I walked to one of my favorite cafes around the corner, set up my iPad, and here we are.

"Mere, I don't know what the hell came over me last night, but yeah, I totally did."

"And your parents believed you?"

"They didn't say they didn't." I shrug. "But then again, Mom doesn't usually come out and say she doesn't believe me. I'm sure she's assuming I'll make up some excuse not to meet with them or that I'll bring someone other than Quinton in his place. She seems to be able to see right through me most of the time."

Meredith grins like the Cheshire Cat. "Well won't they be surprised then when the two of you show up?"

"You think?"

She scoffs out a laugh. "Uh, yeah. When was the last time you introduced them to someone you were dating?"

"Probably two years ago when I was dating he-who-shall-not-be-named."

She leans closer to her phone camera as if she's closer to me. "And you are never going back to that life. He doesn't deserve you. You're so much better off now."

"I agree. He was a total asshat." Memories of my ex-boyfriend Seth float through my mind. He was the perfect guy in the eyes of my parents but if I had to hear one more sideways comment about my looks or lack thereof, *Dateline* would've had a new story to tell about how I tried to get away with murder.

Meredith kicks back in her chair. Her favorite blue chair that I know sits in the corner of her office. "And look at you now, babe. You've landed yourself a pro hockey player."

"Well, not really."

She shrugs. "Hey, you never know, right? The universe is fickle like that. Have you texted him yet?"

"No." I shake my head, cringing. "I'm kind of afraid he won't remember who I am. What if he was a little buzzed last night? Or what if he met some other woman after I left and he took her home and made sweet love to her and now they're getting married and having three and half kids, two dogs, a cat, and a guinea pig?"

"That's oddly specific." Meredith giggles with narrowed eyes.

"The universe is fickle. You said it yourself."

"How about you just do it now?"

"Do what?"

"Text the hockey player."

"You really think I should? Now? What if he's still sleeping?"

"Then he'll answer you when he's awake. It's not like it's the ass crack of dawn. It's ten o'clock."

"Okay, I'll do it." I pull my phone from my pocket and stare at his number. "What do I say?"

"Pancakes or French toast."

"What?"

"Ask him if he prefers pancakes or French toast."

"Why would I ask him that?"

Meredith cocks her head. "Would you rather your first communication be asking him for a dick pic? Or whether he wears boxers or briefs?"

I stare into my iPad meeting her gaze and laugh when we both nod and say, "Boxer briefs" at the same time.

"Okay, okay, here goes nothing."

Me: Dear Mr. Quinton Petty Shay. Do you prefer pancakes or French toast?

Me: Oh. This is Kinsley Kendrick by the way. I'm sorry I should've led with that.

Me: If you don't remember me just send me something like the donut emoji and I promise I'll leave you alone.

Me: Or if you do remember me but maybe you decided last night was one wrong decision after another and you don't think you can be my fake boyfriend tonight because you're a busy rich hockey player and I'm…well, I'm me, that's totally cool too.

Me: Maybe send me a boot emoji. You know, like you're giving me the boot.

Me: That's not a sexual thing right? The boot? I don't think it is. But if it is and now you're offended, I sincerely apologize. Pretend I didn't say anything. Just send whatever emoji you want.

Me: Or none at all. That's fine too. I shouldn't be telling you what to do. You're your own person and you make your own decisions.

"Uhh, how many texts are you sending him? Or are you recounting everything you two discussed last night?"

"Shit!" I raise my head, my eyes large round saucers. "I didn't recount anything." Glancing back down at my phone, I ask, "Do you think I should write him again? What if he doesn't remember our conversation?"

"Relax, Kins. I'm sure he'll remember."

It's not ten seconds before my phone is dinging with an incoming text and a smile grows across my face.

Quinton: Actually, I prefer waffles.

Quinton: *wink emoji*

Quinton: *yarn emoji*

Quinton: *Octopus emoji*

Quinton: *potato emoji*

Quinton: *blue car emoji*

Quinton: *ladder emoji*

Quinton: I feel like those emojis don't get the credit or use they deserve.

Me: I totally feel you there. Who uses the yellow sponge emoji anyway?

Quinton: Exactly. Also, remember you? How could I forget about the girl who told her parents we were in a committed relationship? Fairly sure that was a first for me and that makes you unforgettable.

Me: Hmmm not sure if that's a compliment or not so I'll just pat myself on the back and tell my cat he should be proud.

Quinton: You have a cat?

Me: Yep. He'll be so excited to meet you. Uh, that is assuming he actually does meet you one day I mean. I wasn't implying anything or…you know. Maybe pretend I didn't say that.

Quinton: So, your pussy is male?

Me: He is. Yes. And I guess while we're on the subject, my pussy is also hairless.

Quinton: *wags brows* A hairless pussy huh?

Me: Yep. His name is Nutsack.

Quinton: *spits out drink* Nutsack???

Me: *wink emoji* Have you ever seen a hairless cat before?

Quinton: Can't say that I have.

Me: Picture a relatively hairless nutsack and that's my cat.

Quinton: LOL! Well now I must meet him. My life can't be complete until I've met Nutsack the hairless cat.

Me: I can make that happen. It's the least I can do for what you're willing to do for me.

Quinton: Right. So, I need to know two things before tonight.

Me: Oh. Okay. Shoot.

Quinton: What's your favorite color and where do you live?

Me: Umm orange. And I'm in the loft on the corner of Sixteenth and Williams.

Quinton: Perfect. And what time shall I pick you up?

Me: Dinner is at seven sooo…

Quinton: I'll see you between six and six-thirty?

Me: Alright. Uh, in case I forget to say so, though I'm sure I'll be saying it about a thousand times tonight, thank you for this.

Quinton: No thanks needed. Looking forward to it. *Thumbs up emoji*

I pocket my phone as my best friend looks on with curiosity from her California home. "Well?"

"I think we're going to get along just fine."

"Is he picking you up?"

"Yep."

"And you're meeting early to get your stories straight?"

I shake my head, sitting back in my chair and ripping off another piece of my cinnamon roll. "Nah. We both feel confident that we can pull this off. He seems to have a good enough sense of humor, so it should be a fun evening making up random shit about our relationship and if sitting through this dinner results in my mother finally leaving me alone, either because she thinks I'm in a serious relationship or she thinks I'm bat shit crazy, it will be worth every lie we tell."

"Then I wish you all the luck in the world."

Chapter 3

Quinton

"Thanks again, gentlemen," Rory says as she dishes us all bowls of chili. It's her way of thanking us for helping move her stuff into Hawken's place. "There's plenty more where this came from so eat up. Garlic bread is on the stove."

Rory told us she would be more than happy to hire movers, but Dex was adamant about helping out and pretty much voluntold us we had to be here. Not that I would ever say no. This team is like family. There isn't much we don't do together and I would bend over backwards to help any one of them. Especially Rory because it almost always comes with her cooking as a thank you.

"This is delicious, Rory," I tell her, scooping another heaping spoonful into my mouth. The warmth of her homemade chili hits the spot today.

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it." She turns to the ladies—her three very pregnant friends—and offers them each a second helping.

Carissa shakes her head. "I couldn't eat another bite if I tried."

"No kidding," Charlee laughs, patting her baby bump. "If I eat another bowl, I'll be sitting up with heartburn all night."

"Good! More for me!" Tatum pushes herself out of her chair and waddles to the kitchen for another ladle of the good stuff. "And baby likes chili so maybe Dex is right and it's a boy this time."

I guess a team that plays together and hangs together also fucks together. Not in a weird orgy kind of way but clearly last season was filled with celebrations. Last summer three of the four ladies with us on vacation in Key West found out they were pregnant all at the same time and they're all due within a week or two of each other. What are the odds?

"You know, if you all start popping out those babies at the same time, Coach is going to have a coronary." I lick the end of my spoon and then point it at each of them with my best parent face. "And it better not be during the Anaheim game because they're kicking ass this year and I made a little bet with Oliver Magallan over who's going to win."

Zeke claps me on the shoulder. "Don't worry man. I'll be there no matter what."

"Me too," Hawken promises. "We'll blow 'em off the ice."

"Hey, I'll just be happy if I don't have to deliver my own kid again," Dex explains, looking helplessly at Tatum. He kisses her temple. "You know I love you, babe, but I think I still have PTSD from that experience."

Deadpanned, Tatum replies, "Yes. Because you were the one whose body decided to expel a demon on her bathroom floor with zero epidural."

Dex considers Tate's words and then nods. "Now that you mention it, it would save us a hefty hospital bill if we just had a redo of Summer's birth. I caught one, I can catch the next one too."

Tate flips him off, much to our amusement.

Standing, I take my empty bowl to the kitchen and rinse it out in the sink. "Thanks again for the chili, Rory. I need to get going."

"Where do you think you're going, Asshat?" Dex asks.

Zeke leans over and loudly whispers, "He has a date."

"Oh yeah! Totally forgot about that. You still owe me a beer by the way."

"Fuck off, Dexter." I laugh and make kissy lips in his direction.

Hawken makes up a bowl of chili for Rory and serves her at the table. "So, you're really doing this, huh?"

"Yeah. Sure. Why not? Might be fun."

"Might be?" Colby asks with a chuckle. "You're literally going to lie to this girl's parents about dating her."

"Yeah." I shrug. "What harm can it do? They'll get off her back and we'll have a good laugh."

Milo and Charlee look at each other, playful smirks on their faces as they say in tandem, "Fake relationship trope!"

"What?"

Charlee laughs. "Fake relationship trope. It's a classic romance book trope. See it all the time in the books I edit."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean two people make an arrangement pretending to be together," she says, using quote fingers. "Only somewhere along the line they actually fall in love and there's nothing fake about it anymore."

"Oooh let me guess," I scoff. "You think that's going to happen to me and Kinsley?"

"It's not a popular romance trope for nothin,' my man." Milo tries to hold in his cheesy smirk but he's not doing a particularly good job.

"Yeah? And when was the last time you saw me actively dating someone?"

"Uh, not since Lexi and I don't think any of us have forgotten how that turned out."

"But that's why this will be different," Charlee explains. "You'll fall for her. Just wait."

With a roll of my eyes, I head for the door. "Whatever you say weirdos. I think you might read too many books."

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Charlee gasps. “You take that back! There is no such thing as too many books!”

Laughing, I shake my head and wave before I walk out the door to prepare for my very fake, not at all real, date. “Later gators.”

—

I pull up in front of Kinsley’s apartment and press the button by her door alerting her that I’m here. There are bumps and thuds and crashing sounds coming from upstairs making me wonder what on earth could be going on up there, and then there’s the familiar click of the intercom before Kinsley’s voice shouts, “Come on up, door’s open!” Before she releases the button to the speaker I hear her shout, “Nutsack! Don’t you dare!”

Yeah that’s something you don’t hear someone say every day.

Oh man.

This ought to be good.

Climbing the stairs to her apartment, the bumping and crashing sounds crescendo. I knock on the door before turning the knob, peeking my head inside.

“Hello? Kinsley?”

“NUTSACK NO! YOU GIVE THAT BACK!”

Kinsley clearly doesn’t hear me come in as she’s hastily running after the hairless rodent-like creature that just darted across the other side of the room…wearing clothes.

Her hairless cat wears clothes?

Do hairless cats get cold?

Is that why?

This is weird, right?

I’ve never seen a cat wearing clothes.

The feline jumps onto a nearby shelf, knocking off several rolled posters, a cup of paint brushes, and some white Christmas lights, and then leaps onto the back of Kinsley’s couch. Kinsley comes from around the corner chasing after Nutsack who is now making a beeline to where I’m standing at the door.

“NUTSACK! THOSE ARE MY—”

As if the floor is a slingshot, the cat bounces off his hind legs and flies right into my chest, his nails digging into my suit. He’s hanging on me for dear life and has the audacity to meow at me like I got in his damn way.

“Panties.” A frazzled Kinsley gasps, coming to an abrupt halt in front of me. She’s dressed in a fluffy orange robe, her makeup half done, unless eye shadow on only one eye is a thing these days, and her curly brown hair appears a bit unruly. I wrap my hands around Nutsack the cat and pry his sharpened claws from my suit realizing he isn’t wearing clothes per se.

“Oh God.” Kinsley palms her forehead. “Quinton, I’m so sorry. He fell asleep in my clean laundry basket and I must’ve scared him awake because he leapt out of the basket entwined with my…” She gestures to the purple satin wrapped around his body and tries to catch her breath. “Panties.”

Watching her cheeks flush and her ears redden right before my eyes, I can tell she’s embarrassed so I try to play it off like it’s no big deal.

For anyone keeping track, yes, her hairless pussy did indeed attach itself to my chest wearing her satin purple panties.

Yeah, that’s definitely never happened before.

Holding the cat out in front of me I give her an understanding smile. “And here I thought Nutsack was just a snazzy dresser.”

As if he understood my every word, the cat looks up at me and meows again.

“Nice to meet you too, Nutsack.”

Kinsley takes a big breath and releases a light laugh as I hand her four-legged friend back to her.

“Thanks. Uh…” She quickly works to remove her panties from the cat’s body before he jumps down and scampers across the floor. “Sorry about that, but uh, you know, welcome.” She passes me a nervous smile and then runs a hand through her hair. “I’m sorry, I seem to be running a tad late. Please, come in. Make yourself at home. I’ll just be a minute.”

She turns and scurries to the other side of the loft as I take in the space.

“You live here?” I ask her.

“Yep.”

The top floor of this building is one large open studio. One side of the space holds a bed, an old dresser, a full-length mirror, and a few potted plants, while the rest of the room is taken up by an array of art and photography supplies. Two easels stand side by side, each holding a different sized canvas. A collection of other assorted sizes leans against the wall behind her easels. Three different professional looking cameras with more lenses than I could ever know what to do with sit on a table to the right of the door along with a laptop and a pair of headphones. To my immediate left is cabinetry that takes up the entire west wall of the studio except for the large basin sink in the middle that currently holds a jar of paint brushes, two bowls, two spoons, and four random plastic tumblers.

I step further inside, taking note of the artwork hanging on her walls. Collections of outdoor photographs along one wall, and portraits of random body parts along another.

Whoa.

Yeah, let's take a closer look at those.

The curve of a woman's hips with the hint of lace decorating her skin, a pair of legs in black fishnet stockings leading down to red heels, a woman's chest clad in a deep purple corset.

I wonder if all these portraits are of Kinsley.

If they are…fuuuuuck me.

"Be right there!" Kinsley calls out from what I can only assume is the bathroom around the corner.

"Take your time."

A pair of knitting needles or maybe it's crochet, stick out of a light brown ball of yarn on the couch. I only recognize what they are because Dex has several sitting around his house. Next to the yarn is a box filled with what looks like crocheted rocks, each one with two black eyes and holding white signs. I pick one up and hold it in my hand just in time for Kinsley to come around the corner.

"Positive potatoes."

"Huh?"

I turn my head and she's standing before me, elegantly dressed in a black wrap dress that hits just above her knee. Her hair subdued and tied back with a black bow. She looks beautiful. Like the day I met her at Hawken and Rory's wedding.

"They're positive potatoes," she says again. "I like to make them in my down time and hand them out to people I meet or sometimes to friends who could use a little pick-me-up."

I turn the small, yarned potato in my hand and read the small sign it's holding that says, *I may be a tiny potato but I believe in you. Go do your thing.*

So, it's not enough anymore to simply compliment someone. Kinsley goes out of her way to make tiny potatoes for people to let them know she cares. The sentiment makes me smile. In the past twenty-ish hours, I've learned that Kinsley Kendrick lied to her parents about her relationship status, she comes from money but doesn't want it, her parents don't approve of her life choices, she lives in a studio space with a hairless cat aptly named Nutsack, and crochets positive potatoes for random strangers and friends.

"And the portraits?" I ask, gesturing to the pictures on the wall I was just ogling.

She glances at the hangings and then smiles. "Oh, those. I'm a boudoir photographer."

"A boudoir photographer."

"Mhmm. That's my main job, actually. I photograph women, and some men, in lingerie or sometimes nude. Whatever they're comfortable with."

"Aaaand you do this because they want those pictures? Or do you sell them illegally?"

She laughs. "No, I don't sell anything but my services right now. And yes, the people who come to me want to have the boudoir experience."

"I'm sorry, I've never heard of such a thing."

"Well, I'm happy to tell you all about it, but we better get going or my mother will do nothing but complain about us being late."

"Right. Dinner. Yeah," I say, forgetting all about the reason I'm here in the first place. We have a job to do tonight and that's convince Kinsley's parents that we're a serious couple madly in love. Learning more about the portraits on her wall and the positive potatoes in a box and Nutsack the hairless cat will have to wait.

Following her to the door, I help her slip into her coat and escort her to my car. "Your chariot awaits."

She climbs in and reaches for her seatbelt, clicking it across her lap.

"So how old are you, Quinton?" she asks as I pull out onto the road.

"Thirty-three. You?"

"Twenty-eight."

Twenty-eight?

Fuck…that's a five-year difference.

She huffs out a soft giggle. "I guess that makes you my sugar daddy, huh?"

Suddenly feeling hot I tug at the collar of my shirt.

Five years.

That's not that bad, right?

It's not like I could be her dad.

So, she was thirteen when I graduated high school.

Eighteen when I made it to the NHL.

That's no big deal.

Could be worse.
Right?
Right?
Fuck.

Chapter 4

Kinsley

Quinton puts the address of *Cuisine*, one of the more famous upscale restaurants in town, into his GPS and pulls out onto the road.

"So, uh, is there anything about you I should absolutely know before we get into things tonight? Like, did I miss a birthday recently or umm, what's your middle name?"

"Right," I murmur. "We have to go there."

Quinton steals a glance in my direction. "Go where? Do we need to stop somewhere first?"

"No, no, no." I shake my head. "Sorry, no. I just meant…"

Ugh.

Here it goes.

"Okay, so let's just rip off this band aid. My full name is Kinsley Ida Nippy Kendrick," I rattle off quickly.

His brows pinch but he continues to watch the road. "Uh, I didn't quite catch that. Can you say it again? Maybe a little slower this time?"

Sighing, I repeat myself. "Kinsley. Ida. Nippy. Kendrick."

"Nippy?"

I nod with a roll of my eye. "Yep. I know. Outstanding choice of name, right?"

He's trying not to laugh. I can hear it in his voice. "Is it, uh, like a family name or something?"

"Something like that. My mom wanted Kinsley Ida but my super perfect spoiled brat of a sister had this favorite stuffed teddy bear she named Nippy and insisted on her baby sister having that name too, so…" I sigh lifting my arms in a defeated shrug. "My mom conceded and Kennedy got what Kennedy wanted. So now my initials spell—"

"KINK."

"Yeeep," I drawl.

"Wow. That's…" He shakes his head and thank God he doesn't finish his sentence.

"You can imagine all the shit I had to put up with as a young kid in middle school. *Kinky Kinsley* or *Kinsley the Kink* or *Hey Kinsley what's your kink*? Total embarrassment as an eleven-year-old you know? So anyway, that's me. Now, this is where you tell me your middle name is something like Squirt or Flaccid or maybe something really cool, like Fartknocker."

He finally chuckles but gives me a sympathetic cringe. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but my middle name is Alan."

"Quinton Alan Shay?" I huff. "That's so…boring."

"It is," he agrees with a laugh. "That's me. In the grand scheme of things, I'm pretty boring."

"I'm certain that's not true."

His eyes narrow but he keeps his gaze on the road. "How can you be so sure?"

"Well first, you play professional hockey. That in and of itself is far from boring."

"I guess."

Turning in my seat, I take in his profile. Strong jaw, bulging arms if the tightness of his dress shirt has anything to say about it. Well-trimmed beard that's more than a five o'clock shadow but not lumberjack long. He appears to be someone who puts thought and effort into how he looks.

And how he smells because oh my God! If it wouldn't be ridiculously inappropriate to lick him right now, I would ride the whole way to dinner with my tongue on his neck.

"So, what do you do when you're not playing hockey?"

He huffs out a light chuckle. "You mean when I'm not practicing hockey, going over hockey plays, working out, or doing something for our social media manager?"

"Carissa?" I gush. "Oh, my gosh I love her so much! She was so fun to work with at that wedding event. I still tell people all about it. I mean, as if they didn't read about it in every magazine there is. Also yes, I meant, what do you do when you're not doing your job…which, obviously, is all things hockey?"

"Uh…" He stares mindlessly at the road for a bit, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. "I guess when I'm not working in some capacity or another, I'm trying to relax as best I can. I don't really have…a thing, for lack of a better word."

"You don't go to the drive-in or take long walks at the park or go to the movies?"

He shakes his head. "Not really."

"Concerts? Art events? Something with some culture?"

"Nope."

"So, you just sit at home and stare at the wall or what?"

He cringes this time with a slight laugh. "Man, I probably look abhorrent right now. Should I turn the car around and take you home?"

"What? No!"

"I'm just kidding." He winks. "I hang out with the guys a lot."

"Your teammates?"

"Yeah. They're like family to me so usually we're together more than we're apart."

"And what do you do when you're hanging with them?"

He smirks. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

My eyes grow huge at his inference. "Well, now I would, yeah!"

Quinton laughs. "I promise it's not that exciting. Usually, we're sitting around at someone's house watching hockey with a beer in our hands. Sometimes we play video games or even board games when the spouses and girlfriends are around."

"Well, that sounds like fun!"

"It is. I mean, we all get along great. So, I guess what I'm saying is I'm boring when it's just me."

I wave my hand dismissing his self-deprecation. "Nah. Don't you worry one bit. By the end of this night, you'll be Quinton Alan Shay, the most non-boring pro hockey player I could have ever met."

I turn my body back around to face the front of the car, smoothing out my dress. Quinton steals several glances my way, a humored smile on his face.

"I don't know exactly what that means, Kinsley, but something tells me I'm going to enjoy this dinner with you and your family very much."

"As long as you have your sense of humor with you, I promise this will be a fun evening for us both."

"So, you're not worried about being with your parents then?"

"Hell no. She'll pretend to care about some things and then jab me with her passive insults telling me how great my sister is doing yadda, yadda, yadda like she always does."

"That doesn't sound good at all."

"Yeah well, she'll also be drinking so I can make up whatever shit I want to about my life and she won't remember a damn thing I tell her."

"Hence the supposed serious relationship with me."

I can feel my cheeks heat at his comment. "Yeah. Exactly."

Quinton pulls over in front of *Cuisine* and then hops out, walking around the car to open my door for me. He takes my hand and gives his keys to the valet who hands him a ticket with a polite nod.

"Shall we, Kinky?"

I snort in laughter and squeeze his warm, strong hand. "We shall. Let's do this."

—

As far as introductions go, Mom and Dad were as welcoming to Quinton as I knew they would be given his social status and bank account standing. My parents are nothing if not snobs for the rich and famous. If it makes them money, they want it. If it's worth money, they own it and if not, they buy it. If it's none of those things, they have zero interest.

Hence me and my life.

They've snubbed their noses at little old me for years after I finally ended things with Seth and told my family I was moving to Chicago to focus on my art.

"Art?" They would say with a roll of their eyes as if Picasso and Monet slid out of the birthing canal with paint brushes in their hands. *"Nobody buys new art, Kinsley. It's not worth anything."*

Yep. If I had a penny for every time I heard that line over the years, I could move to France and build a studio right next to the Louvre. Tonight though, my parents are playing their game of woo-Kinsley's-boyfriend-because-he's-rich-like-them. I have no doubt they both assumed I would show up empty handed with my usual excuses, so the joke is on them because Quinton Alan Shay and Kinsley Ida Nippy Kendrick showed up to play.

"So, tell me Quinton, how did you meet our beautiful Kinsley?" Yeah, my mom just called me beautiful, but only because of who I brought to dinner with me.

"It's a funny story actually," he answers as he picks up his drink and takes a sip while giving me some side-eye. I take that as my cue to jump in so I giggle a little and nod.

"Funny indeed," I say. "I hit Quinton with my car."

My mom gasps as she clutches the nonexistent pearls around her neck. "Kinsley!"

"It's fine Mom. I didn't hit him that hard. I wasn't speeding. But if you saw a full-grown man in a pink sparkly tutu fluttering down a back road late at night singing showtunes, you would've freaked out and lost control of your car for a second too."

Quinton nearly spits out his drink.

"Dear Lord, Kinsley," my dad chastises. "Tell me you didn't offer to sleep with this poor guy to get out of getting sued."

"It wasn't like that at all, Mr. Kendrick," Quinton answers for me with a shake of his head. "It was all my fault. I'm the one who had been drinking a little too much that night. I made a silly bet with a few teammates over another game we were

watching together and obviously, I lost."

Dad's brows pinch together. "That's quite the punishment. A monetary bet would've been much less…embarrassing."

"Meh. None of us want each other's money. That's no fun. The guys had a good laugh watching me fulfill my punishment. Those are memories we'll remember and laugh over for years to come."

Swoon!

See parents? Money isn't everything.

"Anyway, I didn't even notice her driving by in all my diva princess glory and I accidentally stepped out in front of her."

"Mercy!" Mom cries. "Thank goodness you were okay."

"Oh yeah, I was fine." Quinton puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him, his hand smoothing up and down my arm. "Kinsley was nice enough to give me a ride back to the house where I was staying. She was an angel that night," he says before planting a kiss on the side of my head.

Double swoon!

"Yep. And he wouldn't get out of my car until I gave him my number and then that entire night he was texting me random emojis that nobody ever uses. I wondered if maybe he had a concussion. It was weird for sure, but also, I thought it was endearing and cute."

"Who doesn't love a good left arrow emoji or the fleur de lis or the—"

"Yellow sponge," I giggle, finishing his thought for him.

"Exactly." Quinton glances back at my mom. "I asked Kinsley out after that more to thank her for not taking pictures that night and selling them to the tabloids, but also, she intrigued me."

"I even made him that cheesecake with the coconut I made a couple of years ago that everyone loved. Remember, that summer party with the Swintons? Who knew coconut was Quinton's favorite? He ate the whole thing!"

That earns me a wink and a smile from my fake Hottie McHotpants. "It was delicious and I was smitten. Kinsley's… different from other women I've dated before."

"Oh, she's different alright," Mom mumbles, stealing a glance at my father who scoffs out a chuckle. "Maybe a little bit of your motivation for the ultimate success and your obvious competitive drive will rub off on our daughter." Mom leans in and whispers, "She's had her head in the clouds a bit lately if you haven't noticed."

"Mom…"

Here it comes.

She waves her hand dismissively. "I'm just saying."

Quinton stiffens beside me, his arm still snug around my shoulder. "Actually, I find what Kinsley does fascinating. She's really finding her place in this huge city. Her fun-loving personality is what attracted me to her the most. Everyone I know just wants to be in the same space as her. If you ask me, we need more people like her to keep us rooted in our humanity, you know? "

"Mmm." Clearly, Mom doesn't seem impressed. "Yes, Kinsley definitely digs her feet in when it comes to what she wants verses what she needs. You call them roots, Quinton, but I see them more like…tree trunks. Insanely stubborn and without a purpose. Her kind of art for one thing. I've told her a million times there's no money in modern art by artists with no name for themselves, but here she is, living in this huge city, insisting she be allowed to chase a dream."

"It's not a dream, Mother. It's my—"

Our food is delivered to the table before I can finish my thoughts. Averting my eyes to my lap, I tell myself the faster I eat, the faster we can get out of this hell and then I can thank Quinton for his kindness and be on my way. If I'm lucky, I can still get in a good hour of painting and then cuddle with Nutsack for the rest of the night.

"Did your sister tell you she's being presented with an award?"

For what, Mom? Most expensive tits?

"Nope. But I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"It's the annual Cheryl Stevens Woman of the Year award for all her philanthropy with those inner-city children."

Of course, she's being awarded for sending a random charity a big fat check when she never sets foot anywhere to actually be of help or service to others. That's exactly Kennedy.

"Wow." I fork a piece of steak from my plate and stick it in my mouth before I can say what I want to say instead of what I should say. After chewing a few times, I finally nod. "I'll have to congratulate her."

"So, Quinton," my father starts while chewing his filet mignon a few moments later. "Any interest in the luxury hospitality business?"

"Hotel real estate, you mean?" Quinton asks.

"Indeed. Great opportunities for investment, you know."

Inwardly I roll my eyes. *Like Quinton doesn't know how to manage his money, Dad.*

Quinton dabs the corner of his mouth with his napkin. "Actually, yes. I'm a silent investor in my twin sister's hotel resort in Hawaii."

What?

He has a twin sister?

I didn't know this!

But I have to act like I've known all along.

"Are you really?" Oh, now Mom is interested. Of course, what's not to love about investments and real estate? Is this what all rich people talk about? "One we might know of?"

Like they know every resort in the world.

Okay, they might know all of them in California or maybe the New England coast but let's not go overboard.

"It's a small family-owned resort called Kamana Wanalaya. Was in my brother-in-law's pseudo family for years and when they wanted to retire, he and my sister were getting married and decided to move out there and take over the resort. They've been doing a wonderful job with renovations. I'm excited to get out there during the off season to see the place."

"That's wonderful!" Mom exclaims. "Isn't that wonderful dear?"

Dad nods. "Yes, well, it seems we have something in common now Quinton. Deborah and I purchased the Silver Pines Luxury Resort in Breckinridge and we've added a world class spa and we just hired a five-star Michelin chef for the new restaurant. Our grand opening is at the end of the month…"

Nooo no, no, no…

He can't…

Shit.

He's not going to—

"And there will be many noteworthy people in attendance to help us celebrate. We would love to have you both join us in our—"

"Oh guys, remember, it's the middle of hockey season." My nerves begin to flutter through my stomach at the thought of spending an entire weekend with my parents. Or making Quinton have to fulfill this fake agreement any longer than tonight. "Quinton has a busy game schedule. He'll hardly have ti—"

"I'd love to come. Thank you for the invitation Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick."

What the fuck?

Does he hear himself right now?

"Oh please, dear, it's Deborah. Deborah and Steve."

"Right. Steve, Deborah. Thank you. I think some time at your resort sounds wonderful and just so happens, since I'm not participating in this year's All-Star game, I'll have a few days off."

What is he doing?

"It's settled then." Dad nods with a smile. We'll host you in one of our luxury cabins."

I would rather lick shit from an ice-cream cone.

"Great!" I give them a well-plastered smile and pass a swift kick to Quinton under the table. He merely chuckles in response. "Can't wait."

We spend the next few moments in silence enjoying our meals before my dad starts talking hockey with Quinton. Then Mom cuts in with questions about his charity work, once again leaving me out of any kind of conversation. I get it. Quinton's the new guy for them. They want to know all the things. And I know now not to expect much from my family when I'm the black sheep who decided to take the road less traveled. It was my choice not to go into the family business. It was my decision not to spend my adult life rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous, always wearing a fake smile and pretending my life is perfect.

Still, it would be nice to at least be acknowledged at the table.

—

"What the hell was that?" I unbutton my coat once back in Quinton's car, the need to free myself from any kind of confinement growing stronger by the minute.

"What? You don't think it went well?"

Fanning my face, I give Quinton an apologetic smile. "I mean…I guess it could've gone worse, but you do remember accepting my father's invitation to join them in Breckenridge, right?"

"Yeah…about that."

"Don't worry. I can get you out of it with no problem. I'll just tell them that y—"

"No." He cuts me off with a shake of his head as he pushes his hand through his hair. "Don't tell them anything."

He pulls the car out onto the street joining the regular flow of the evening traffic and all I can do is stare.

At him.

At the road.

At him again.

"I don't understand. You really don't need to go. They'll totally understand if you—"

“I do need to go.”
“Why?”
“Because I need your help.”

Chapter 5

Quinton

"You need *my* help?"

I don't know what I'm doing. I think I feel a bit like a fish out of water and I'm only saying that because, well, I have no idea what the hell it feels like to actually be a fish out of water but I'm assuming it's a bit like this. The feeling of having the air sucked out of you when you realize you're no longer swimming comfortably and so you're flipping your fins as fast as you can trying to catch that breath you know you need to survive. It's out there somewhere, you just can't reach it.

Like I said...a fish out of water.

That's what I thought of the moment the Kendricks started talking about their new resort and inviting me to attend their grand opening.

Panic.

Not because I was being asked to come. It was more because they were talking about charities and celebrities and being a part of that whole world. It dawned on me as I was chatting that in a couple of months I'll be attending a charity event for the organization I work with and the very last thing I want to do is show up there alone looking like a pathetic lonely sap when *she'll* be there with another man showing off her wedding rings.

"Yes, I need your help."

Kinsley blinks a few times before nodding. "Okay. What does it have to do with Silver Pines Resort?"

"It doesn't," I answer. "Not really anyway. This is more like…a tit for tat kind of thing."

She turns in her seat to face me a bit. "Tit for tat, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Alright. I'm all ears."

Gripping the steering wheel, I take a deep breath and release it heavily. "Okay, so you know how you asked me to pose as your boyfriend because you had already told your parents we were a thing?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe you could do the same thing for me."

Kinsley's eyes grow huge and her mouth opens wide. "Oh, my God. Quinton Shay, did you tell someone we were dating too?"

"What? No!" I shake my head. "It's not like that."

"Oh. Okay."

"Remember at dinner I was telling your parents I work very closely with this charity for kids called G.A.M.E.?"

"Yeah. Growing…umm, I'm sorry I can't quite remember what GAME stands for."

"Growing Athletically Mindful Enthusiasts. It's an organization that collaborates with community and school sports programs. They do a lot of coach training and leadership training with kids and adults. Even parents too. Their focus is on team-sports play and teaching others how team sports can help develop a young athlete's positive mental health."

"Right! Yeah. That's seriously cool. What a great asset to any sports community."

"Yeah. It is. And it's been great working with them for the last five years or so. Anyway, their annual fundraising event is in the early spring toward the end of our season and you know…" I shrug.

Kinsley shakes her head. "Nope. I don't know. Don't have a clue."

Ugh. She's going to make me say it.

"This used to be something my ex and I did together for a couple of years. I got her involved with the organization and she kind of ran with it. Now she's everywhere they are."

"Aaah. I get it. So, this ex is going to be there."

"Undoubtedly."

"What's her name?"

"Lexi. Lexi Stock."

Kinsley's mouth hangs open. "You mean Lexi Stock from the women's soccer team?"

"Yeah."

"Whoa! You two dated?"

"Yeah. For a couple of years."

"And you want to make her major jealous? Is that why you want me to go with you?"

"Ye-wait…no. I mean I couldn't care less about making her jealous. She's already moved on and married some other douche who I'm sure has way more celebrity to his name than me."

"Is that why you broke up?" she asks.

"Huh?"

"Did she ditch you for a quote-unquote bigger celebrity?"

Pangs of anger shoot through my chest at the memory of Lexi leaving me.

That night on the red carpet.

My arms around the woman I loved.

Until she walked straight out of them into the embrace of another man.

Talk about humiliation.

"Something like that. Look, I'll do it if I must, but I would rather not go to this kind of event alone so…you know. I'll go to Silver Pines with you if you'll be my date for G.A.M.E. night."

She touches my arm tenderly. "Of course, I'll go with you, Quinton. I can be a doting girlfriend. I'll even rave about you in the women's restroom and tell everyone how skilled you are in the bedroom." She winks. "I'll have them all wanting a piece of you by the end of the night."

A faint smile spreads across my face. "You don't have to do that. I'm perfectly fine having a fake girlfriend for the night with no unnecessary drama. Plus, with the other celebrities that will be there, I hardly doubt anyone will care about me."

Kinsley scoffs a laugh. "If you want to believe, that you go on ahead, but have you ever been a woman in a women's restroom when celebrities are around?"

"Uuuh no."

"Then trust me. They'll all be talking about your dick size before they're even finished reapplying their lipstick."

"Good God, can women think of nothing else to talk about in a bathroom?"

Kinsley narrows her eyes as she studies me. "Umm, no. No, we cannot. And are you seriously telling me you guys don't talk shit in the locker room?"

Her question makes me laugh because fuck, we've had some doozies when it comes to personal conversations in the locker room.

Like the scratches on Hawken's back from Rory.

Whose ass reigns supreme among the team.

Milo and his cock rings.

Dexter and…well, just about anyone he ever fucked before Tatum came along.

Colby and his Lucky Charms fight with Carissa.

Colby's brother and his Mardi Gras shenanigans.

"Touche. I suppose you have a point. So, is that a yes to extending our arrangement?"

"It's a yes, Mr. Shay. You have a deal. I'll be happy to pose as your super sexy and loving girlfriend and promise to be at your disposal the whole time."

"Super sexy, huh?"

She snorts in the most unsexy way but it makes me laugh because she's nothing if she's not cute. "I mean, hello! You're putting me up against Lexi Stock! She's like…gorgeous and…ridiculously athletic, but don't you worry. I'm totally up for this. I just hope this event is an evening gig because it's going to take me all day to get myself ready to knock that bombshell out of the park."

Why Kinsley thinks so little of herself is beyond me, though I expect her mother has made quite a condescending impression on her if what I observed tonight has anything to do with it.

"First of all, Kinsley, you're a beautiful person inside and out. I know this already and I've barely spent more than five total hours in your presence. Secondly, and trust me when I tell you this, Lexi Stock is not the goddess the media makes her out to be. I know that firsthand."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Are you saying she farts in her sleep and has cellulite like the rest of us?"

I try not to chuckle but dammit, it's hard to tell if she's being serious or if she's joking with me. "She absolutely farts in her sleep. She also has horrible morning breath, and she can't say the word breakfast."

Kinsley giggles. "What? What do you mean she can't say breakfast?"

I shake my head, smirking. "She can't pronounce it correctly. She says 'breftist' every single time."

"No, she does not."

Holding up my right hand I laugh. "Swear to God."

"You are too funny!"

"I'm just saying, comparison is the thief of joy. You seem to be someone with a lot of joy and a joyful personality is attractive so don't sell yourself short."

"That's extremely sweet of you, Quinton. Thank you. And for what it's worth, thank you very much for tonight. You did great. I'm sorry my parents were a bit…"

She doesn't finish her sentence so I finish it for her. "Passive aggressive but mostly aggressive?"

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Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

"Don't call on Thurley unless you like. I dare say she does not expect it. Every gawk of a country girl will crowd in on her, curious and self-seeking, and if Thurley wants to see any one, she'll come to them. She doesn't belong to the town any more but to the world." His voice softened as he added, "Good-by, dear; now don't work your head off. I'll lunch at the hotel—there is so much stuff to catch up on."

That same afternoon Dan's car drove slowly past the Fincherie, whose crisp curtains and lifted shades told the world a new, optimistic story. No one was visible, not even the much discussed lady's maid or the accompanist who was said to sit on the lawn and drink endless cups of tea "right in the middle of the afternoon!"

Further along in the road he was hailed by a dreaded trio—Josie, Hazel and Cora!

"Oh, Dan, do take us by her house," they began, waving their arms in wild invitation. "We're crazy to see her—Cora never knew her," Josie Donaldson explained by way of excuse as they climbed pell mell into the machine.

"I guess she won't want to remember us," Josie added, "but ma sent over my winter coat one time and she wore it two seasons—she ought to know *me*."

"My aunt helped her a lot too," added Hazel Mitchell, "and she borrowed every one's books. I don't think she'll dare put on airs. I'm going to start right in and call her Thurley just as if I didn't know she was famous. I'm dying to get inside that house. Just think, girls, it hasn't been opened for years until—" Thin ice was fast approaching in the matter of the past and with a swift side glance at Dan, who steered ahead with a fiendish hope of dashing his human cargo off the nearest cliff, Hazel winked at the others and began anew,

"How's Lorraine?"

"Fine! Where do you girls want to go?"

"To call on Thurley. Please, Dan, drive us up there. It'll look so much better if we came in a machine."

"Your machine, anyhow," giggled Josie.

"Aren't you working to-day?" he asked Hazel savagely.

"I had a headache and the doctor said I needed fresh air."

"Then you better stay outdoors instead of calling on people, if it's fresh air you are after," he advised.

Nothing but giggles answered him and they hailed the white clad figure of Owen Pringle, who held up his cane in threatening fashion.

"You sha'n't have the prettiest girls all to yourself, you old married man," he threatened. "Do let me sit in the back—"

Unwillingly, Dan halted the car and a new element of disturbance was added.

"We want to call on Thurley Precore," they told Owen, who was always at his best when his arms were full of girl and some one else was driving the car. "Come along and we'll ask her to let you design some hats—come on."

"Joyful, joyful, joyful," he began in an assumed falsetto, at which Dan drew the car to a standstill and looked around with a frown.

"I don't wish to call on Thurley," he said sharply, "as you well know. If you insist on my driving you up to her house, I'll do so. My wife will call on her when she sees fit."

Which somewhat subdued the quartette, who murmured their gratitude and were hurriedly raced back until the Fincherie was reached. Whispering their thanks, each personally thinking what a dreadful disposition Dan Birge had, they raced up the walk—the leisure class of Birge's Corners, as Dan thought with half a chuckle.

He was wondering what Thurley would say to them, as he turned his machine in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XXVII

Dan's car rounded the driveway of the cemetery, one of those desolate country burial grounds on a remote hill with a neglected wooden fence running about it and wild shrubbery crowding in on the graves. He saw a smart cab in front of the tottering gate. He knew it belonged to but one person—Thurley—and he deliberately halted his machine and crossed the road to read the telling monogram T. P. entwined with fantastic plumes, consolation for having no real ancestors or crest. As he did so, Dan was glad—glad with all his heart!

He climbed the path which was nearest Philena's grave. He knew Thurley would be beside it.

... She was sitting with her back towards him, lost in her thoughts and unconscious of any one's being close at hand.

Dan paused. He was trembling—as Lorraine trembled when he had so grudgingly asked her hand in marriage. He knew Thurley had never loved him in the deepest sense—and yet—he seemed to see her as the old wild-rose girl in gingham, waiting for her lover's coming!

He put his hand to his head as if it pained. Then he came a step in advance. It was hard work to believe this was Thurley. She wore a wonderful silk driving coat which covered an afternoon frock of val lace tied with pink ribbons and a petticoat of pink satin. Her hat, a large, white lace affair, lay beside her, its silver ties half hidden in the grass. Her brown hair was smooth and glossy, betraying endless brushing and care. One hand halfway supported her splendid, tall self—it was very white these days and the nails shone, while a ring of diamonds sparkled up in triumph. Her pink satin slipper toes and the flesh-colored stockings peeked out coquettishly. With a flash of

humor Dan spied the tiny anklet watch on its braided, glittering chain. Thurley was very close to the crimson rambler plant which she and Dan planted for Philena on a Memorial Day, long before Thurley had said her reluctant yes!

Here he stepped on a twig whose crackling noise caused Thurley to turn half way and glance up with neither fear nor surprise—nor special delight.

"Why, it's Dan Birge," was all she said, raising her hand cordially.

"Do you mind?" His voice sounded weak and far away. "May I sit down? I—I was passing and I saw your cab; I was sure it was yours from the monogram—"

"If you like. How nice to see you again!" She spoke in such deliberate fashion that Dan wondered whether she was pretending. She seemed years older. It was not the rouge nor the sophisticated look in the blue eyes—nothing one could describe, unless one wished to be abstruse and say her soul had aged.

Dan broke the pause by saying lightly, "Odd we should meet here, isn't it? I was out of town when you came—Lorraine told me about it last night. She asked if she should call—I didn't know whether or not you'd like to have her."

"It would be most kind," Thurley said in the same even voice. "I have been deluged with calls—mostly out of curiosity. Or to see if I would deny having worn some one else's clothes and having lived in a box-car ... the old car was used for kindling for a poor family, Ali Baba says."

"I didn't know about it until it was too late to save it. It hurt when I thought of your old wagon being chopped up."

"Did it? Sentimental goose," she managed to laugh at him.

"Were you having a serious 'think'?" he asked, after a brief silence.

"About Philena—" She plucked some long blades of grass and began plaiting them into a ring. "How well you look! Lorraine takes

good care of you, doesn't she? Does she look as splendidly?"

"Wish she did—you'll see her, no doubt."

"If I stay here. I threatened to move this morning. Some old neighbors came in during my practice hour—they don't understand!"

"What made you come back," he asked with a flash of the old boy spirit, "when you never even wrote me!"

"Do you think it was yourself?"

"No. I'm quite removed from you in every way. Why, that dress and ring cost more than Lorraine spends in a year! As Ali Baba says, 'you are a great lady'—for you wouldn't have come back unless you were," he added honestly. "It makes us feel shabby and underdone by contrast.... Of course I never hope to be the same to you—you have everything the world can give you for pleasure and attention. I'm not deluding myself. I'm not such a jay as most of the boys—"

"You never were," she supplemented quickly.

"I always tried to be 'citified,' to wake the town up and keep abreast of the times. Anyway, I loved the finest girl the village ever knew." There was a quiver in his voice. It was like reopening a newly healed wound and letting it bleed a trifle.

"And you married her," Thurley insisted, the coquette coming to the surface. She tilted her head to look down at him through half closed, purplish eyes.

"I *loved* her—and I have a splendid wife," Dan corrected.

"What a lot happens in three years!" Thurley finished the grass ring and stuck it on her engagement finger. "Shall I make one for you?"

"Do! Ought I to be here taking up your time? Perhaps you wanted to get away from every one or you wouldn't have come." Dan felt the contrast between them more and more; his clothes seemed poorly fitted and his scarf pin a trifle gaudy, his shoes the fire-sale

variety—a country bumpkin beside this adorable, tall girl in the lace and pink satin with distracting, tangly ribbons.

"I like to talk to you, Dan. I wondered how we would meet!"

"What made you come back?" he demanded. "It wasn't the Corners and I don't flatter myself it was me ... for you could have written me at any time and I would have come!"

The slim fingers stopped plaiting the grass. "Would you—*really*?"

He looked at her with despairing eyes. "Did you get any big baskets of orchids and lilies with a card, 'from an old friend'?"

"Were they from you?" she said sadly. "Oh, Dan, it was too bad you ever had to care for me!"

"Can you stop the birds from singing or the sun from shining—or a fool for loving some one very fine?"

"Why, no," Thurley looked out at the hills. "That's always the hardest thing in the world—not the caring for some one but caring for some one who doesn't care for you!"

Dan reached over to take her hand. "Is it that that brought you here?" he asked tenderly. "Doesn't some one love you? You needn't answer. I know ... so fame isn't enough," he dropped her hand almost roughly. "Everything's in the devil of a mess," he remarked to no one in particular.

Thurley caught the drift of his remark. "It's the devil of a mess," she repeated clearly, "because we are not bad enough to be all bad and do terrible things that blot out the hurts or not all good so we can be saints with wings and harps for consolation ... we just struggle—most of us."

"When did you know I was married?"

"The night of my début—like a story, isn't it?"

"And we were there—'Raine and I—on our wedding trip." After three years' attempt at bravado, the real heart of him was allowed to

suffer, suffer as it should have done three years ago instead of fanning revengeful temper on as a worthless substitute.

Thurley faced him directly, hugging her long legs under her boy fashion. "I'm not worth it. The best part of me is my voice, Dan. Only the worst part of me isn't content to have it that way. I've worked mighty hard since we said good-by—I've known all sorts and conditions of people, great and near great, good and bad—I've had all sorts of men make love to me and I've encouraged all sorts of men—just so far. I've done things no one would approve of my doing and some things that only a few could approve of or understand. Mostly though I've worked and worked and I've decided that it is either work for me all my days if I'm to keep on singing, or else I'll stop working and love and be loved, perhaps. But the two do not go hand in hand ... perhaps I'm bitter."

"She made you promise never to marry," Dan interrupted; "she is a selfish old woman who wasn't fair!"

Thurley nodded. "Love made her insane," she defended.

After a moment Dan said, "Sing for me, Thurley, like you used to—when things were different."

Reaching out her hand, Thurley held his in simple palship as she sang in a hushed voice the old tunes they both had loved. As she finished, he said with an effort,

"Maybe we better not see each other this summer."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm only a small town man with a mighty fine wife and you are a genius coming here to amuse yourself, to make yourself forget some one who doesn't love you—and that's not a wise combination! I'm liable to lose my head ... I kept it pretty well after you left."

"Do you blame me?" She seemed contrite herself. "Were you fair?"

"I suppose not. It was just the choice of two futures—you chose the one intended for you. Only now that you've chosen, don't keep on bruising yourself and every one else by trying to—trying to—"

"Don't you want to see me?" She was determined to have some one want to see her own self, whether or not she sang a single note.

"Don't I want to? I'll always want to." He came closer to her. "Were you never sorry you went away? It would help a lot to know."

Closing her eyes and remembering as little of the three years as was possible, nothing of her vow or Lorraine, Thurley gave vent to her starved womanhood. "A little," she whispered.

"Then I will see you and be your pal," was his answer. "Let me be just that. No one can say there's any harm in it—not even 'Raine. I'll have her call on you, Thurley; that will make it right." He was very close now, his cheek almost touched her own. She drew away.

"In opera those tenors make love as if you were their own," he said savagely. "I hated to see it!"

"But you were on your wedding journey," she reminded.

They both laughed, jangling, noncontagious sounds.

"But, Dan, we'd never have gotten along," she reminded him. "I'm a creature of whims and moods—spoiled, of course, it was inevitable." She began telling some of her experiences.

"But you won't forbid my being just pal," he urged, as she consulted the anklet watch and found it tea-time.

"Not if you're content to have it that way," she promised. "Run along and I'll follow, it would never do to have us drive off in unison."

As she stood up her rumpled lace draperies made her seem more like a little girl.

"Thurley, Thurley," he said in sort of impassioned reverie, "you have come back to me—"

"Only for the summer," she answered in gay decision. "Oh, Dan, remember I haven't really found myself, nor shall I, perhaps. So think of me as lightly as you can. My present state of mind would permit of but one motto for over my fireplace,

'Forty miles from wood,
Forty miles from water,
Forty miles from hell—
God bless our home!'"

Lorraine knew Dan had visited with Thurley, so did the village. She wisely kept her counsel and consented to Dan's stammering request that she call on Thurley—"after all, it might look queer if she did not."

So she went, as much of a martyr as she had been when she brought Thurley the blue set for an engagement present. This time she passed into the parlors of the old-fashioned house aglow with their pretty trifles and cut flowers, the grand piano in the center like a precocious and not to be ignored child, and met Thurley in timid, dignified manner, taking count of her Parisian costume, her new mannerisms and accent, her rather flippant opinions of the topics of the day, promising her thumping little heart that when she was alone, in the peace of her own house, she would struggle to regain her poise and contentment of mind which this astonishingly charming yet affected person fairly wrested from her!

In fact Birge's Corners called on Thurley prepared to ask curious and mortifying questions, only to make a hurried exit in quite a different frame of mind. For with a perfectly cordial manner Thurley met all alike. She had a faculty of making them feel their own selves quite impossible; they were ill at ease before her—nor did they ask her to sing, she forestalled that before the subject of the weather was exhausted. They left saying that "Thurley had a way with her—and Dan could thank his lucky star he had been saved from the marriage." Thurley repaid no calls—not even to Lorraine, although the latter had asked her from a sense of duty. She lived in her own

way at the Fincherie with Miss Clergy nodding approval on whatsoever she did or demanded. In a short time, when she flooded the town with what the village dubbed as lunatics, no one was over-keen to have her call.

The "lunatics" were men with bangs, wearing broad scarlet sashes and going without hats in the sun, sketching under white umbrellas and talking "some queer language"; the women had bobbed their hair and possessed more gowns than brains; they slept away half the morning and danced away half the night while Thurley was the gayest of all the strange company, turning the Fincherie lawn into a stage to have tableaux and folk dances, and all her guests, bobbed-haired or banged or what not, scowled at the natives curiously and commented upon them audibly as if they were insensible of understanding.

Dan Birge was seen driving with Thurley, drinking tea on the Fincherie lawn, being a spectator at the entertainments. Lorraine grew more fragile-looking but kept her own counsel and Owen Pringle failed to secure an autograph or an order for a bonnet, while Josie, Cora and Hazel found no encouragement or interest shown in their dramatic, musical or matrimonial futures!

Presently, the Corners said it would be a blessing if Thurley Precore would choose some other place to spend her summers. Whatever made her pa and ma drive into the town in the first place? She would get her "comeupment" for this smartness, to say nothing of a real white slave dance which she gave, at which she was auctioned off to a big fat man with white hair and a tucked, crêpe de chine shirt, who made his living playing on a little penny whistle! The devil did not have all the good times in the world—neither would Thurley Precore. The older generation had felt from the first it was not boding good luck to have so great a spirit develop suddenly via a partly demented recluse. Here was proof enough! For Thurley and her friends neither went to church nor patronized church social affairs. They lived "like they tell of," was the report, "just as like to get up at three o'clock in the morning to go on hollerin' and yellin'

like to wake the dead or else sleep like logs until noon ... and if Miss Clergy thought she had done a smart thing in makin' so much out of Thurley because Thurley *used* to be able to carry a tune, she had an awful awakening ahead of her!"

"She'll never get her married off to no one," the village further commented, when Thurley in a tight fitting black habit had cantered up and down the streets on a snowy white mare, while a moving picture man from New York patiently lurked along the roadside to catch a few poses. "Dan Birge ought to go down on his knees to thank Lorraine for marryin' him ... but does he? Oh, no, when he gets down on his knees it's only to tie up Thurley's shoe latches! Never mindin' his business nor his wife's fadin'—nor the sport they make of him right to his face—he's a worse fool than they are!"

When the Corners became aware that Thurley's terrier, Taffy, had several sets of harness and sweaters, they decided it was far more depraved than Dan Birge's buying a dog and having him ride in the front seat of the car. Following on the heels of this discovery, the terrier had a birthday party with a frosted cake and three candles, and the newspaper editor admitted that they had sent in a paragraph describing the event, fully expecting it would be published. Upon being pressed for the details, the editor said the sum total of the description read,

"Taffy Precore was the proud recipient of many handsome gifts, including a set of white rubbers from Madame Lissa Dagmar and an unusually attractive travelling coat from Collin Hedley. Covers were laid for fourteen and special out-of-town guests were Woofie Airedale, whose guardian is Siri Mantenelli, the opera singer, and Ogre, foster child of Ernestine Christian!"

But even this atrocity was matched—Dan Birge had given Taffy an expensive feed tray and was present at the party. Hazel Mitchell took the day off to circulate the rumor which developed into the report that the tray was not aluminum but Haviland china with a hand-painted monogram in the center! Had Dan been seen kissing Thurley

he could not have been more bitterly condemned. Truly, Thurley Precore must get her "comeuppance."

Ali Baba summarized it one late summer's day as he watched Caleb, Polly and Thurley play tennis against Collin, returned from Bliss's hermitage, Mark and Lissa.

"Well, Betsey," he said, leaning on his lawn-mower handle, "these women covered with lady powder and their dresses cut so low as to leave a fust rate advertisin' space and these fellers a-whangin' and a-bangin' at their fiddles or tryin' to paint a pretty little blue lake to look like a green icicle and none of 'em mendin' a sock or drivin' a nail or carin' about anything except who can eat the most or laff the loudest, all of 'em thinkin' 'what's yours is mine and what's mine is my own'—I want to tell you Thurley's got to get rid of the whole bunch, if she's goin' to be worth a pinch of snuff. This way she'll neither be fish nor flesh nor good red herring!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

After a busy but personally unsatisfactory winter, the war clouds for America gathering without pause, Thurley admitted to Ernestine that she now understood the need for nerve specialists, that she agreed fully with him who has said, "a state of emotion without some action as an outlet is immoral," and she proceeded to drink more black coffee and light wine than was good for her, jeopardize her eyes by midnight reading of morbid Russian novels and to carry on half a dozen affairs with Mark as a sort of everlasting threat in Lissa's direction. Yet in her work Thurley had increased in ability and interpretation; her *Juliet*, *Ophelia* and *La Tosca* were each welcomed as superb achievements.

"Because, my child, you are burning up your personal habits and tastes and nice Jersey cow nerves," Ernestine said with delicious melancholy. "I knew it was inevitable—you could never stay the rosy-cheeked schoolgirl. You'll keep on using up your personal endowments. Fame is a cruel stepmother to personal happiness and you'll be like the rest of us—quite impossible except when you are before the public."

At which decree Thurley fled to engage in a rousing afternoon of ice skating with Mark, only to have Lissa dart down on them with her purring, dangerous smile and rescue Mark. She then sent him on an errand and drove Thurley home in order to bestow a few feminine scratches.

"I'm quite shocked, dearie," Lissa began as they bowled through the park, "to think you'd take up with the country bumpkin—really, with your career and looks and the way you've been keeping your hand in with Mark—" a bit of a pause here—"it seems to me you ought to play for bigger stakes than that funny storekeeper from Birge's Corners ... aha, you are blushing! I'm glad you admit guilt. All

well enough when you lived in that queer place and he was the richest man in it. It is always well enough when one knows the richest man, no matter how queer the place! But now, Thurley, with the desirables you could—”

“Dan is an old friend—nothing more,” Thurley defended.

“Then keep your sentiment in check until you go back to that queer place, for you’ve let him come to town to see you—twice that I know about.” Lissa’s eyes danced with delight.

“He comes to buy things for his store.” Thurley was strangely alarmed at the secret being discovered.

“Does it mean he must see you? I suppose, poor lad, he spends half his profits on you. What sort of a bonnet will his wife have for spring? Oh, Thurley, if only Bliss and Ernestine hadn’t tried to make you a nun and an opera singer at once—wrong—all wrong as can be.”

Thurley felt it was her turn to scratch. “Anyway, Lissa, Dan is harmless; he’s only a shopkeeper and I’m not stopping his career.”

“You allude to Mark?” this with dangerous sweetness.

“Of course, you make him a mediocre dancer when he’s the ability to be something fine and big—I don’t know what, but I’m saying it is wrong for him to merely dance and if you’d prod him the other way, I’m sure he’d go. Besides, there’s no way out for you two, is there? I can’t imagine your marrying any one and it isn’t fair to Mark—he’ll be dry rot before he knows it.”

“I married a mild person a long time ago; he let me gain my freedom in my own way—it is more satisfactory to be Madame Dagmar than plain Miss. I advise a marriage for the sole reason that the world always takes more interest in you; they are determined to find out what made the marriage go awry. When critics begin to harpoon, Thurley, get married, be divorced and you’ll find a sympathetic welcome from the public.” She lifted her gold chain with

its dangling pencils, rouge boxes, tiny brandy flasks and other trifles, swinging it back and forth with a clinking sound.

"But Mark—is so young—"

"And I am so old? What an amiable little girl it is! I can stay young as long as youth loves me." She seemed a wicked person hiding under a girl's mask. "Don't worry about Mark—unless you happen to be in love with him."

When Thurley came home that afternoon, she found a basket of flowers from Dan and a note saying he would be in New York before June. Trips to New York were not ordinary, easily managed affairs for Dan. He must plan to be away without being suspected. Then he would come to town and stay at a hotel, restless, eager and thoroughly ashamed if he would but admit it, until Thurley permitted him to see her, drove with him, entertained him at her apartment, treating him in a half patronizing, half genuine manner—not quite clear herself either as to her motives or emotions. It was as impossible to think of an actual intrigue with Dan Birge as to associate schoolboys in the lower forms with being regular brigands. True, they play at it—it is often their pet pastime—but there is a prompt ending of it when the supper bell rings, wooden swords and false faces are willingly left in the woodshed and plain Tommies and Jacks cluster around the table!

So it was with Dan. Thurley, talking to him of this or that, of anything save the things she would have liked to talk of, now scolding him, threatening to send him home, playing now that she was annoyed, now that she was sentimental, now pensive or even angry,—Thurley was doing a simple and a natural thing, proof of what Ernestine had prophesied. Thurley was using Dan as her whipping boy, outlet for her repressed and lonely self. Dan was the ooze, some one human to whom she could vent her whims and moods; some one wholesome and clean-minded with whom she was entirely at ease. She selfishly refused to think of the apparent indiscretion, the lack of honor which she incurred when she let him come from the Corners to stay in New York a week while she

showed him her restless woman's self, and let his own man's heart learn to want her in new, dangerous fashion.

Yet Dan was "playing" too. After all, Lorraine was his wife and he had grown fond of her—used to her would be more truthful and less romantic. She was "mighty good to have about." It was a relief to return from New York with memories of Thurley as the great opera singer, aloof, coquettish, temperamental, useless save for her own work, and find the sunny little home with Lorraine who never questioned his absence nor shirked in her tasks. And if the tapestry furniture, Queen Anne walnut and mahogany pedestals with plaster statues got on Dan's nerves when he recalled Thurley's strangely beautiful apartment, and Lorraine's dowdy frocks made him visualize Thurley in some wonderful swirl of satin and lace—Dan realized that a man may be happily married and yet partly in love with some one else at the same time. After this realization, he re-ordered his life to fit the situation and his generosity to Lorraine, like his manner, was dangerously kind and thoughtful. The town, which would never exhaust Thurley's return as a topic for debate, said, fooling its narrow little self, "I guess Dan is sorry for how he acted!"

Sometimes Thurley wondered if Bliss Hobart knew of Dan's visits. Once she was determined to make him speak to her about something save her voice and decided to tell him, but he forestalled her by saying that the "songbirds" were giving him an album as a present and although he did not care which picture most of them selected for his gift, he had an idea he wanted Thurley as her own self and not in any costume rôle—did she mind?

They were in his office when he made the request, Bliss sitting at his desk, as he had been sitting the first time she had seen him, his fingers touching the little mascot she had shyly presented that initial and wretched Christmas.

"Of course not,"—knowing she blushed unbecomingly. "What sort of a 'myself' picture will your majesty have?"

"Oh, just Thurley—when you blush do you know you leave the rouge boundaries far behind? Please don't do your hair like oyster shells—Lissa is the only person sufficiently vulgar to do so—and wear a close fitting white turban besides!"

Emboldened by his request Thurley ventured further, "What makes you order me about so? Am I always to be a novice in your eyes?"

"I like to remember you as you were that first Christmas. I do think, Thurley, Christmas is the only time I ever allow myself to be sentimental. Remember how you looked in your blue serge, bright red coat with silver buttons and an ermine tam tumbling off your head—a splendid, real thing you were."

"I've a picture taken then," she said softly.

"Say it is mine and I'll tell you a secret—the greatest sculptor in the world is to be my guest very shortly. He is here from his native land, Alsace-Lorraine, to gather funds. He will speak to us because I'm going to give him a party and at the same time Collin will have the surprise of his life!"

"Not going to be married?"

"You women! Worse luck. I say—his picture, 'Cupid and the Peacock,' has been given the French medal—and the master will announce it to him."

"I'll send the picture up to-morrow," Thurley promised.

Hobart's eyes were twinkling and tender all in one. "Well, well, I'm more important than the great sculptor or Collin's success! Thurley, you are becoming dangerous! Some day we shall have a great reckoning, you and I," and before she could tell him of Dan he had bustled her out of the room, teasing her until she wished she had refused him a photograph of her own self.

When Thurley sat at Hobart's supper-table to listen to the old master speak of Collin's brilliant but heartless picture, as he aptly described it, and then a little of his treasure trove of art knowledge, as she saw his stooped and wasted body wrapped humorously in a

gay shawl despite social custom, his face dark and dotted with bumps and wrinkles as a New England field is with granite boulders, wild white hair like white flames leaping from his skull ... she missed the beauty and the wisdom of his words. Instead, her young and attractive self recoiled from the physical appearance of this genius—the price the master paid in order to concentrate, shut out the things of romance, everyday diversion. As she looked at the faces so intent on the great man's words—words like a benediction, it seemed, for he knew his days were numbered—it seemed to Thurley she saw naught but distorted, repressed or self-indulged expressions and she must rise and leave the room, go into the world a young, untalented girl doing some senseless, regular thing and let those who should love her for her own self speak out and prove their worth; that this drowsy hum about fame and genius was nothing but a sedative the unloved adopt to still the ache. She did not want to sing better than any one else, better than Jenny Lind, so the world told her, she wanted to sing poorly—and have one man say, "I love you—"

Her hands clenched together under the cobwebby tablecloth, as she realized that she had pledged to remain aloof from such possibilities and, by so doing, she had met the man whom she would always love ... she wondered if she had betrayed her lack of interest in the master. He was saying slowly,

"The two great influences helping me to attain my mark were, first, my mother was my friend; then, when middle age waned and inspiration seemed to have taken flight, I heard Bliss Hobart sing, and so I went on." He was droning now over some technical thing but Thurley kept hearing the words, "I heard Bliss Hobart sing," and with redoubled determination she promised herself to rouse the man in him to speak to her, to give her fresh inspiration, new courage—to go on alone.

"Everything is symbol," the master was concluding, "and there must be unity about all artists no matter how disconnected and illogical they may appear on the surface. The artist must not trust anything but his eyes, for they shall see the inner truth of whatever

he is choosing to depict. Ugliness to the vulgar becomes beauty to the artist, for he sees the inner meaning of it and knows that by portraying it faithfully he can destroy it. Take the picture, statue, word description or acted part of the drunkard, prostitute, the fool, the pervert—do they not cause the sane yet inartistic person to turn away in horror, resolved a thousand times more strongly to live right?"

... Here Thurley's mind wandered back to the old man's confession, "I heard Bliss Hobart sing," and she was lost in reverie until she caught again the master's earnest voice as he advised all young artists to see statuary by lamplight in order to find the ivory shades of light and dark shadows that daytime never reveals, not to put more color in the sunrise than did Dame Nature nor carmine on young lips nor fat greens in the summer foliage.

"For then," he said, smiling wisely, "you cease to be artists, but become dreamy and conceited liars! Be sincere; no matter what you may believe, be sincere." After which he sat down as confused as a schoolboy, protesting against the applause, admitting in an undertone to Ernestine Christian that "America was too wonderful, her food too sophisticated, her women too daring." Then Lissa tried to attack him from the other side with some silly question which caused the old man to lapse into his Alsatian jargon,

"Tè, Matame, je ne sais pas—"

Thurley left the party early; Caleb told her afterwards that Bliss was disappointed for he wanted the master to hear her sing. She took a delight in having cheated him of the request. She went to her bedroom to rummage among her belongings until she found an overposed stage picture of herself as *Violette* in "Traviata" and she inscribed it to Bliss Hobart, sealing it in an envelope and marking it, "For the album—could not find the other."

She said her dutiful good night to Miss Clergy, looking with magnanimous pity at the frail ghost lady who patted her white, ringed hand and said as she had done so many hundreds of times,

"How lovely you are, Thurley—and how proud I am! You have never given me any anxiety—not for a moment.... What a girl you are and what a joy it has been!"

To-night, Thurley lingered a moment longer than usual. "Do you think I shall never love?" she asked nervously.

Miss Clergy sat up in bed, clutching her cashmere shawl in excitement. "Love a man?" she asked breathlessly. "Oh, my child, it would only bring harm!"

Thurley soothed her as if she were a child. "I won't break my promise—not even after I repay you—and I'll never repay you if I keep on buying pretties, will I? What an extravagant goose I'm getting to be, vying with every one else for the brightest trifles!" She was talking more to herself.

Miss Clergy misunderstood her meaning. "Never repay me, Thurley! What do I want with money? All I have will be yours, now do you understand? All I have!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Go to sleep, there's a dear," Thurley said swiftly, "and when you watch my flirtations, remember they are only to make the stage loves the more real." Turning off the light she left the ghost lady to her haunted memories.

Half the night Thurley searched among her possessions, finding and destroying notes from admirers, Dan's boyish, imploring letters, her own childish diary she had kept the first year in New York, Bliss Hobart's few mementoes—the crayon sketches Collin had made of her abroad, Ernestine's letters. She reread her press clipping book, her expense accounts, personal memoranda; she added and deducted figures as if she were a scientific accountant. Then she walked into her clothes room and looked at all the lovely, rainbow things of becoming richness; she opened her jewel case and stared at the glittering bits of beauty within. It was as though she were taking a complete inventory of one Thurley Precore, prima donna.

She undressed herself slowly, never taking her eyes from her image in the glass, plaiting the brown hair into two braids, each as

thick as her own arm. Then she rose and quoted quickly the master's telling command,

"Be sincere—no matter what you may believe," adding, "so that's decided—no matter what comes," startled at the insolent assurance of her eyes. If one could have seen her face as she slept one would have noticed foremost of all that a permanent sneer seemed painted on the scarlet lips.

CHAPTER XXIX

Whatever Lorraine thought concerning Dan's frequent absences and his attitude regarding his home and what happened therein, she still followed the path of the Victorian era and kept her own counsel. Nor did any one try to disturb her gentle self by the agony of doubts. For one reason the "genteel grafters," such as Cora, Hazel, Josie and Owen of the art shoppe fame, came to Lorraine's home only for what advantages could be obtained. Why then disturb her who gave them the advantages? There might be an end of them if they did. To be sure they gossiped among themselves and the societies and lodges with vivid imagination and a generous manner of embellishing a truly innocent but unique situation—a high-minded, spirited man too high for his town yet too undisciplined for the city who haunted the footsteps of a high-minded, spirited woman who had become big enough in abilities for the entire world and who was dying inwardly of ennui and heart-lonesomeness, who took this mild sort of affair as the one genuine and refreshing thing in her hurried, *de luxe* existence. Neither of these young people realized the harm it incurred. They cheated themselves into believing it "merely palship" or "an expression of individuality"—a very nice sort of garden and not wild oats affair!

Sometimes Thurley met Dan with a zest for his boyish mannerisms, his telling of the rise in wool goods, what a splendid housewife Lorraine was—only she didn't understand things—how jealous he was of the basso who made love to Thurley on the opera stage. Sometimes she looked at him in disdain, the strange sneer on her lips as she thought of what a dull existence was Dan's, what a lark it was to see him strive to make as good a showing as the young millionaire who was hopelessly infatuated with this Thurley Precore, boasting at his club that she would wear his necklace or his flowers before the season ended. The vampire which is in all women

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